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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UNDP PUSHING ELECTORAL REFORM  
PROJECT, BUT WON'T IMPACT JULY ELECTION

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A meeting with UNDP's Electoral Project Manager revealed that the project is moving forward very slowly, due largely to financial issues, in exposing this government to international standards and helping put them into practice. The manager has put significant hopes on the success of a July 1 seminar designed to put key government stakeholders in one room and encourage them to develop a roadmap for bringing national legislation into compliance with both regional agreements and international standards. The UNDP would have liked to have the project impact each of the national elections here, such as the July 26 Gengesh elections, but this is unlikely to happen. UNDP has clearly had a tough time with this project, but as an organization it shows signs of stubborn commitment to seeing at least portions of it through. Since UNDP is the only foreign mission that has had any luck getting government cooperation with this type of project, the international community should step up with more funding, at least in the near term. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) Political Officer met on June 17 with UNDP Election Project Manager, Orazdurdy Hezretov, to learn about Turkmenistan's preparations for the 26 July Gengesh (local council) elections and about assistance UNDP is providing on electoral reform. Hezretov described the project's activities as a continuation of the three-component effort begun in 2008. Last year, UNDP had done extensive work on capacity building within the government agencies that are involved with elections.

3. (SBU) He said they are continuing their work on the public component, meaning UNDP's training of national election observers and distribution of voter education materials, which was done last year. This year, UNDP has been trying to complete further aspects of the public component. A training seminar that combines training for candidates and their supporters and international standards training for national observers will be held in Mary on June 26-27. Hezretov said a legislative seminar on international standards that will include all the relevant election-related agencies is being organized now.

¶4. (SBU) The goal of the July 1 seminar is to review international standards and Turkmenistan's international obligations on elections, in order to foster discussion on the eventual development of a single, comprehensive national electoral code by the end of 2012. Hezretov noted that UNDP has identified three potential consultants for the seminar, one of which will provide expertise and advice on revising or developing new legislative text. The three choices are IFES consultant Dan Finn, Jesse Pilgrim from the UN's Electoral Systems Department, and Ayman Ayoub Ayoub. All three, Hezretov said, are qualified to assist with the seminar, and are already on the UN roster. However, he said that UNDP has run short of funds that will be needed to fund at least one of these consultants. He noted that UNDP was looking for a party willing to donate some \$10,000-15,000 to pay for this element of the project.

¶5. (SBU) This year, the project had also included an element on the role of the media, to include election broadcasting, media public information and voter education campaigns, but the Turkmen government had refused UNDP permission to conduct this aspect of the training.

¶6. (SBU) Hezretov admitted that UNDP had been organizationally behind the curve in regard to its intention to use the project to help the government in the lead-up to each of the national elections that had taken place in 2008 and 2009. He largely blamed the slow decision making of donor entities that frequently agreed to fund project aspects too late in the game to implement the project element. With Gengesh elections scheduled for late July, he anticipated

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that UNDP would be providing little in the way of assistance or guidance to the Turkmen government beforehand. He provided several examples in which UNDP had to cancel project work because the funding came too late. Assisting the government with its revision of Mejlis and Gengesh election laws did not happen, he said, because government entities had to stick to a tight deadline schedule regarding the legislative revisions. UNDP basically couldn't move quickly enough to accommodate the government's timeline goals, he said.

¶7. (SBU) Hezretov was hopeful, however, that he would be able to get funding arranged soon to assist with revision of the election law for the Halk Vekilleri (Peoples Councils), or village representatives. (NOTE: Even among Turkmen citizens, it is still not clear what role the Peoples Council representatives will play. Before the National Halk Maslahaty was dissolved last year, village representatives served in that body. Now, it is unclear to whom they will answer. END NOTE.) Local staff assess that the next Halk Vekilleri election will take place in December 2009.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Hezretov's comments suggest that UNDP will play only a minor role in July election preparations. However, UNDP is currently the only international entity in Turkmenistan that has been able to engage in project work on electoral reform. Since other missions and potential donors have not achieved the trust that UNDP has developed here, perhaps providing some financial assistance to enable it to achieve at least some baby steps on election reform would be money well spent, at least in the near term. END COMMENT.  
MILES